

*Kristen Dennis**Hog Creek Review*

The Last Words

Irony. Pure irony, that's what it was. He chuckled darkly through the heavy wetness of his chest, a spray of crimson flecking his knee at the sound. He had come into the city to find a woman to remind him that cold wasn't the only sensation left in the world, and now as he lay in the shattered dirt and steel, his own knee was the only thing left to keep him warm as he lay with his back against the remains of a blackened tree. His leg was rapidly robbing him of even that small comfort, as the blood that kept it warm spread in a puddle around his body. One hand lay uselessly over the wound as the other shakily held his last cigarette to his lips.

When he'd put on his uniform that morning, he hadn't figured it would be the last one he would ever wear. In fact, if he had to pick something to be the last thing he ever wore, the ugly faded gray and black standard and meticulously shined boots would not have been his choice. It was ridiculous to think that he would die in such a detestable show of unity with a disjointed and shattered army, which was so much dust and graves now.

He chuckled again. Deserter, they would have called him. Coward. But here he was, alive to witness the last blood red sunset, with the birds shrieking and black against the columns of smoke. He was alive, and where were they? They were scattered across a dozen battlefields, buried in the dirt or left to rot. At least he was free of their useless chatter now, their how-do-you-do's, and how-have-you-beens. He was free of their politics and regulations, their ideals and practicalities. Now, there was just him.

Taking a luxurious drag of his quickly shrinking cigarette, he watched the smoke drift from his lungs toward the rest, reaching for Heaven as fruitlessly as the rest. Scratching the stubble on his chin with his end two fingers, he turned his dulling eyes down the remains of the street, hearing nothing but the fading crackle of the city's alert system and the furious licking of the flames as they consumed the traces of a metropolis. It was shocking, really, that he couldn't hear his heartbeat, as he could feel it throughout his body, in the pulsing agony of the slowly draining wound in his torso, and the quickly numbing tips of his fingers.

His heartbeat seemed so important, for some reason he couldn't quite puzzle out at first. His ragged deep brown eyebrows rose as he figured it out. He was the last. The world

was dying, and he was the last man left. His was the last heartbeat. It seemed like it should have been profound for some reason.

Flicking away the expended butt of the cigarette, he shifted, crunching the mixed brown and black dirt beneath him with his boot before he settled again.

Yes, it should have been profound. As little as he had ever cared for the decorum and the sparkling requirements which had always been forced on men in his profession, he was the last, after all. His last words would be the most important of the few words he'd ever spoken. Maybe even the most important words that had ever been spoken, aside from the first, perhaps. Even though they would be as useless as the rest, he felt a sense of instinctual obligation to make them grand, to honor a hundred thousand years worth of prolific speakers, writers, and leaders the world over.

His brow furrowed as he contemplated, ignoring the sudden roaring of his ears as the world seemed to grow silent in its anticipation.

Come, man! the silence seemed to shriek. Something worthy of the honor! Speak of the mysteries of the universe, of what secrets have been revealed to you alone! Tell the cosmos of the accomplishments of your species, which had dominion over the planet for so long, bending fate itself to its whims!

Time seemed to slow, the flames stilling in their duty as they too awaited the historic declaration. He tapped his bottom lip with his thumb, holding his chin as he thought.

Tell us the intimacies which can only be spoken to the silence! the dying world urged. Whisper the thoughts that you would never have dared voice to a world which might have overheard! Speak of secret loves and scandalous desires, of the burning passions of ten billion souls upon the earth! Oh, speak! We beg of you!

Lowering his hand, he nodded thoughtfully and opened his mouth, drawing breath to release the unbearable tension which gripped the world, bent around him.

"I'm still cold," he said.

His heart stilled. All was still.